

**BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL NARCOTICS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT AFFAIRS**  
**2009 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)**  
**February 27, 2009**

**Syria**

**I. Summary**

In 2008, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic (SARG) continued to publicize its efforts to interdict and punish drug smugglers, while downplaying domestic narcotics consumption. Syria remains primarily a transit country for narcotics en route to more affluent markets in Europe and the Persian Gulf. Continuing political conflicts in Lebanon and Iraq, porous borders, and endemic police corruption make Syria an attractive overland smuggling route between Europe/Turkey and the Persian Gulf. Domestic Syrian consumption of illicit drugs is not widespread, largely due to harsh penalties and cultural norms stigmatizing substance abuse. However, recent reports indicate an increasing prevalence of local prescription drug abuse, particularly in Aleppo. Syria continues to have a working anti-narcotics relationship with Saudi Arabia and Jordan, but counternarcotics cooperation with Lebanon has diminished since Syrian forces withdrew from Lebanon in 2005. Syria is a party to the 1988 UN Drug Convention.

**II. Status of Country**

Syria is not a major producer of narcotics or precursor chemicals. Due to political conflicts in neighboring Lebanon and Iraq, however, Syria is an increasingly important transit country for narcotics between Europe and the Persian Gulf. Hashish, heroin and cocaine are, respectively, the most prevalent narcotics transiting Syria destined for Lebanon and Europe. Syria is also along the trafficking route for Captagon (fenethylline), a synthetic amphetamine-type stimulant. Captagon is increasingly trafficked through Syria from Turkey and Lebanon to the Gulf States. A newer phenomenon, however, is the smuggling of Captagon through Syria to Iraq for use by foreign fighters and insurgents.

**III. Country Actions against Drugs in 2008**

**Policy Initiatives.** Syrian drug policy is based on Law No. 2 of 1993, which authorizes harsh punishment—including capital punishment—for those convicted of narcotics manufacturing, trafficking, or sales. However, the same law requires treatment at state-operated rehabilitation facilities for drug addicts who surrender to the police. Provided addicts have no other serious criminal offenses, and make a good faith effort during treatment programs, Law No. 2 exempts them from punishment. Authorities

admit that some drug dealers have exploited this aspect of the law to avoid incarceration and locate additional customers.

In 2002, Syria upgraded its Counternarcotics Unit from a branch to a directorate of the Interior Ministry. The government also opened regional counternarcotics offices in Aleppo province, covering the Turkish border, and in Homs province, to monitor the Lebanese border, with eventual plans to open offices in the remaining provinces. A new police facility for the Syrian Anti-Narcotics Department was opened in Damascus during the early part of 2006. With the opening of the new facility came the arrival of new and updated equipment that will be used to enhance Syria's drug investigation capabilities. This facility also houses the country's newest drug lab. In 2005, Syrian officials implemented a 2002 draft decree providing financial incentives of up to several million Syrian pounds (\$1 = 50 SP) to anyone providing information about drug trafficking and/or illicit drug crop cultivation in Syria. Parallel to that, the SARG created the National Committee for Narcotic Affairs, which was tasked with setting up general drug-related policies and coordinating efforts with relevant local and international agencies to formulate prevention and treatment plans. The National Committee for Drug Affairs convened in June 2008 and recommended the establishment of a drug database, the funding of expanded awareness campaigns and treatment programs, and preparation of a national anti-narcotics strategy (including rehabilitation). Headed by the Minister of Interior, the committee includes representatives from a broad range of concerned Ministries, civic organizations and vocational unions.

Syria also contributed to combating the spread and trafficking in narcotics through the Arab Bureau of Narcotic Affairs, which is affiliated with the Arab League. Through this organization, Syria exchanges narcotics trafficking information with other Arab countries.

Nevertheless, there were some reports of public violence associated with drug addiction. One incident occurred in the Sbeina suburb of Damascus and included vandalism of private property, fist fighting and knife crime. One Sbeina shop owner told media that "not a day passes by without a problem or a quarrel". Another said that merchants shutter their shops whenever addicts are fighting for fear of sabotage. Pharmacists in the area reported that they refuse to sell tranquilizer tablets to drug addicts. One pharmacist added that tranquilizer tablets are smuggled from Lebanon through Syria.

**Law Enforcement Efforts.** According to a report published by the Counternarcotics Directorate, the number of successful drug apprehensions during the period January – August 2008 stood at 2,800 cases and the number of persons standing trial on drug-related offenses was 4,348. The report added that during the same period, the Syrian government confiscated 191 kg of hashish, 41 kg of heroin, 128.5 kg of cocaine, 6.8

billion Captagon tablets, 22 kg of hashish oil, 390 liters of precursor materials and 95,800 assorted narcotic tablets. The confiscated quantities were burnt by the Syrian authorities.

In a bid to combat narcotics smuggling and drug dealing, Syrian law enforcement personnel cracked down on drug dealers and continually reported their successful raids in the local media. In April 2008, the Syrian authorities dismantled a network of Arab and foreign nationals who were trafficking narcotics using Turkey as their base of operation. According to media reports, the culprits received a capital punishment sentence *and* were ordered to pay a fine of SYP 1.5 million each (presumably prior to their execution). Syrian law enforcement also apprehended a gang trafficking drugs in the Al Mujtahed neighborhood of Damascus and confiscated 1 kg of heroin intended for sale. On September 2008, law enforcement officers in Lattakia apprehended 21 persons for drug trafficking and addiction. Similarly two drug dealers were arrested in Dayr Ezzor with heroin in their possession. One particular case of smuggling along the Syrian-Israeli border was reported by Agence France Presse: On July 20, 2008 Israeli security forces opened fire on suspected drug smugglers along the Israeli-Syrian border, killing one Syrian citizen and wounding another. The incident occurred when a joint army and police patrol, searching for drug traffickers in the Golan Heights, identified a group of suspicious people, an Israeli army spokesman told AFP. The army said that the deceased man and the wounded man were both Syrian citizens. Others arrested were identified as residents of the mostly Druze town of Majd al-Shams in the northern Golan.

In October 2008, the Syrian Ministry of Interior and Interpol held a meeting at the Syrian Training Institute of the Internal Security Forces to discuss the smuggling of Captagon tablets to the Middle East. Experts from Interpol briefed the Syrian officers on ways that Interpol can help to combat Captagon trafficking, including an overview of Interpol forensic analysis programs and its anti-narcotics database.

Syrian officials characterized cooperation on drug issues with neighboring Saudi Arabia and Jordan as excellent, but say that counternarcotics cooperation with Lebanese and Iraqi officials has diminished. Turkey continues to provide some technical assistance to Syria, primarily training courses, as part of their joint efforts to combat trafficking of narcotics, according to Turkish officials based in Damascus.

**Corruption.** Generally speaking, corruption is a daily fact of life in Syria. Cultural acceptance of corruption, in addition to below-average compensation for police and customs officials, creates an environment ripe for smuggling. The Syrian government did not provide information on whether it had conducted any investigations into corruption, and the SARG has been reluctant to discuss this issue further. The Syrian government has an Investigations Administration (Internal Affairs Division) responsible

for weeding out corrupt officers in the counternarcotics unit and the national police force. The Investigations Administration is independent of both the counternarcotics unit and the national police and reports directly to the Minister of the Interior. As a matter of government policy, the Government of Syria does not encourage or facilitate illicit production or distribution of narcotic or psychotropic drugs or other controlled substances, or the laundering of proceeds from illegal transactions.

**Agreements and Treaties.** Syria is a party to the 1988 UN Drug Convention, the 1961 UN Single Convention as amended by the 1972 Protocol, and the 1971 UN Convention on Psychotropic Substances. Syria has signed, but not yet ratified, the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the UN Convention against Corruption. Syria and the United States do not have a counternarcotics agreement, nor is there an extradition treaty between the two countries. However, the Syrian and Cypriot Interior Ministries are currently discussing the signature of an MOU (proposed by the Cypriots) to cooperate in fighting illegal migration, terrorism and drug trafficking. To this end, the Syrian Interior Minister and the Cypriot Assistant Police Commander met in June 2008. As of November 2008, both sides were still in the process of reviewing the draft MOU.

**Cultivation/Production.** Traditional drug cultivation and production remain at negligible levels in Syria. However, Syria does have a sizable, legitimate pharmaceutical industry that produces inexpensive prescription pain medication, among other drugs. Currently, the trafficking of prescription pain medicine is not legally categorized as the equivalent offense of trafficking in illicit drugs, despite the addictive nature of most prescription painkillers. Additionally, Syrian law currently supports the common practice of "leasing" a licensed pharmacist's credentials. In this practice, investors may "lease" a pharmacist's credentials in order to open and operate a licensed pharmacy in Syria. A pharmacist will receive payment for allowing his/her name to appear on the business registration, but the pharmacist may have nothing further to do with the operation of the pharmacy.

In 2007, multiple media reports highlighted significant abuse of prescription drugs in Aleppo, specifically Valium, Baltan and Proxamol. Several pharmacists were threatened with violence by addicts and dealers attempting to obtain painkillers without a prescription. After accounts of taxi drivers being beaten and robbed, many Aleppan taxis refused to enter certain neighborhoods known for prescription drug trafficking activity. An Aleppan social worker also reported seeing an increasing number of cases of children as young as 10 addicted to prescription pills. Responding to these reports, Syrian police closed 50 pharmacies in the greater Aleppo area in late October for selling prescription painkillers to customers without a doctor's prescription. As each of the offending pharmacies was operated by a businessman leasing a pharmacist's

credentials, the Aleppo Pharmacists Union requested the government's intervention to close this legal loophole.

Although cultivation of narcotics is a minor problem in Syria, rare incidents were reported. On June 2008, a law enforcement squad in Al Padrosia village apprehended a man for planting approximately 100 kg of marijuana on land adjacent to his house. Additionally, Syrian authorities found 3 kg of semi-dried marijuana in his house. The accused was transferred to Lattakia for trial.

**Drug flow/transit.** Syrian officials estimate that in 2007, the overall flow of illegal narcotics transiting Syria and destined for other countries had increased. As mentioned above, one likely reason for this increased traffic is that the continuing political conflicts in Lebanon and Iraq have made Syria a more attractive overland smuggling route between Europe/Turkey and the Gulf.

Transshipment of narcotics from Turkey continues to represent the major challenge to Syria's counternarcotics efforts, as the porous Turkish/Syrian border provides easy entry points for drug smuggling into Syria. Narcotics coming from Iraq are transported into Syria either directly or via Jordan. The SARG's reported seizure statistics suggest that SARG counternarcotics efforts have been more effective, or more likely, the overall flow of narcotics has increased. Main shipment routes include the transit of hashish and cocaine through Syria to Europe and other countries in the region; opium transiting from Pakistan and Afghanistan through Syria to Turkey; and Captagon pills transiting from Turkey through Syria to Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

**Domestic Programs/Demand Reduction.** The Syrian government's counternarcotics strategy, which is coordinated by the Ministry of the Interior, uses the media to educate the public on the dangers of drug use and drug awareness is also part of the national curriculum for schoolchildren. The Ministry also conducts awareness campaigns through university student unions and trade unions. The SARG also regularly publishes accounts of successful law enforcement efforts to combat narcotics in the various government-owned media outlets. Anti-drug campaigns were noticeably on the rise during 2008. A three-day drug awareness campaign took place in Aleppo in late June 2008, organized by the "For Aleppo" NGO, the Family Planning Association, the Aleppo Health Department and the UNRWA. The campaign will continue for one year, and is aimed at both drug awareness and treatment of addiction. Also, In November 2008, Aleppo University in cooperation with the Ministry of Interior held a seminar about the dangers of narcotics. Lt. General Ahmad Hourri, Head of the Anti-Narcotics Department, talked about different types of narcotics and the socio-economic dangers of drug addiction. Dr. Abdullah Al Habbash, Comparative Criminal Law specialist, discussed the 1993 drug law and its provisions for sentencing of drug dealers. The seminar was attended by the rector of the Law Faculty and a number of students. In late January 2008, the Boy

Scouts and Girl Scouts held a special seminar on "Drugs and their devastating effects on youth and society."

Due to the social stigma attached to drug use and to stiff penalties under Syria's strict anti-trafficking law, domestic consumption of illicit drugs remains low. In 2007, the head of Syria's Counternarcotics Directorate claimed that there were no more than 150 drug users per one million citizens, or roughly 3000 nation-wide. The SARG maintained the same figures for 2008, adding that 95% of drug addicts are delinquents with criminal records. Although there are no independent statistics available to verify the accuracy of this claim, anecdotal evidence suggests the SARG is significantly underestimating the prevalence of illicit drug use in Syria. Furthermore, the government's estimate likely does not include prescription drug abusers, as mentioned above. Unless the government enacts legislation to close the loophole allowing businessmen to "lease" pharmacists' credentials, increases the penalties for trading prescription medication, and raises public awareness of this problem, it will likely grow.

#### **IV. U.S. Policy Initiatives and Programs**

**Policy Initiatives.** In discussions with Syrian officials, DEA officials continue to stress the need for diligence in preventing narcotics and precursor chemicals from transiting Syrian territory and the necessity of terminating any involvement, active or passive, of individual Syrian officials in the drug trade.

**Bilateral Cooperation.** DEA officials based in Nicosia, Cyprus maintain an ongoing dialogue with Syrian authorities in the Counternarcotics Directorate.

**The Road Ahead.** The United States will continue to encourage the Syrian government to maintain its commitment to combating drug transit and production in the region; to strengthen anti-money-laundering legislation; and to continue to encourage Syria to improve its counternarcotics cooperation with neighboring countries.